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ECONOMIC GROWTH

(Economic Reform, Private Sector Development, Trade and Agriculture)

Building bridges in Mindanao

FROM THE STANDS By Domini M. Torrevillas

(Source: Philippine Star News Online – 3/15/08)

DAVAO CITY — While rallyists in Manila yesterday were demolishing whatever good things President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has done for this country, a forum held at the Marco Polo Hotel in this city presented developments on her priority infrastructure projects intended to improve the lives of people in Mindanao.

The absence of an aggressive campaign program may perhaps be faulted for not informing the public that the government has been building bridges, roads, airports and seaports in order to accelerate the economic progress in Mindanao, considered the “food basket” in the southernmost super region. Telling people in imperial Manila that something’s going on down here demolishes the once rightful belief that the inhabitants of the island, because of government neglect, still live in gadawful straits.

In fact the building frenzy going on is impressive, particularly because most of the projects are intended to be completed by 2010 – a most fearsome date barely two years away.

The infrastructure projects in Mindanao got started when President Arroyo envisioned in her 2007 State of the Nation Address the Philippines as “a modernized society in 20 years.” I take that to mean a modernized society in 20 years — regardless of who will be the president at that time.

She created the “Super Region” development strategy blueprint which groups together regions and provinces for infrastructure investments. This, to stimulate

economic growth, spread development away from an inequitable concentration in Metro Manila, and set the country in step with its Asian neighbors.

Infrastructure projects were planned for the five regions — the North Luzon Agribusiness Quadrangle, the Luzon Urban Beltway, Central Philippines, the Mindanao Agribusiness Super Region, and the Cyber Corridor.

At the 3rd National Government Infrastructure Forum yesterday, Secretary Cerge Remonde, chair of the Presidential Management Staff, told national and local government executives, investors and funding agency heads and media persons the paradoxical situation of Mindanao, considered the country's food basket, as accounting for 40 percent of the country's food requirements and contributing more than 30 percent to the national food trade, and yet having six of the ten poorest provinces in the country.

These are reasons, said Remonde, why the government is investing in 27 major priority infrastructure projects which will not only support agribusiness development, but also give greater access to Mindanao, "thereby energizing the region, and bringing development closer to the people of Mindanao."

The projects include seven airports, two ports, nine roads, eight power and energy plants, and one major irrigation project. Also being constructed are small irrigation projects and farm-to-market roads. Most of these will be completed this year. Completed are the impressive Diosdado Macapagal Bridge in Butuan, the 210-megawatt clean coal plant in Phividec and the 950-kilo-volt photovoltaic power plant in Cagayan de Oro. All these projects cost P73 billion. Worth waiting for is the start of construction of the Laguindingan airport in Cagayan de Oro City. Also included in the development strategy is the upgrading of hospitals and cold storage and ice-making plants, and a jatropha nursery.

The projects, costing P73 billion, connect provinces, cities, towns, and farms, by air, land and sea transport. One can travel faster through good roads — from Zamboanga to Davao, to General Santos and Bukidnon, to Iligan, Butuan and Surigao. They reduce transport costs and hasten the movement of agricultural produce from farms to urban centers.

As the forum speakers kept stressing, the facilities improve people's incomes. Undersecretary Virgilio L. Leyretana, chair of the Mindanao Economic Development Council, said the infrastructure projects are "the arteries for progress, provide equity and access to economic opportunities for the depressed and vulnerable rural communities by opening new areas for economic development and linking the production areas with the urban centers and market."

To the Manila rallyists, their question would be, how much of the money will go to individual pockets? President Arroyo foresaw this question, by creating the Pro-Performance System (PPS) to "be merciless in ripping through undue obstacles in

the way of overdue priority infrastructure projects.” She also created a steering committee to monitor and ensure the transparent implementation of the 27 priority projects.

The good that the projects bring is reason for Jesus Dureza, who is the head of the Mindanao Super Region, to rejoice. Not only is his region (he is from Davao) going to experience economic and social progress, he said, but as Peace Secretary, he also sees that economic progress will bring peace to the region. He spoke of the peace negotiations taking place between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, and addressing the concerns of the Moro National Liberation Front.

The PPS Steering Committee, together with the PMS, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Asia Foundation, organized the forum.

The forum brought together Governors Loreto Leo S. Ocampos (governor of Misamis Occidental as well as head of the Governors League of the Philippines), Kahlil Dimaporo, and Douglas Cagas; Vicente T. Lao, chairman of the Mindanao Business Council; Chairman Saeed A. Daof of Southern Philippines Development Authority, and prominent business leaders. Members of the Pro-Performance System were there, like Donald G. Dee, and Ruperto S. Nicdao Jr.

USAID country representative Jon Lindborg expressed a “message of Optimism,” observing as he has, a “moving forward,” of seeing “real progress” during the past year. He noted fundamental elements at work in the development efforts — competition, transparency and sanctity of contracts. He is impressed by the projects that would bring “tangible benefits” to the people of Mindanao, and expressed delight that USAID has helped in bringing in “a small way, progress to Mindanao.”

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